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## Scholarly Monographs May Be the Ultimate Victims of the Upheavals in Trade Publishing

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When the managing director of Pantheon Books, André Schiffrin, was forced to resign last February for allegedly having run up large losses for too long, there was an immediate outpouring of protest against the narrow “bottom-line mentality” of Random House, Pantheon’s corporate parent. This culminated on March 5 with a demonstration in front of Pantheon’s New York offices by over 300 writers, agents, and editors, who railed against Random House’s owners, the Newhouse family, for committing cultural genocide.

Pantheon had been one of a vanishing breed of commercial publishers that had a reputation for publishing books for their cultural value rather than solely for their expected profitability. However, the management of Random House had decided that Pantheon must not only reduce the number of titles it publishes each year to cut costs, but also must publish books that sell more copies than had many of Pantheon’s customary titles. Conglomerates increasingly have been exerting such pressure on the commercial publishing companies they own, thereby eliminating publishing outlets for writers of “serious” books.

In all the controversy that raged over the “culture versus profit” conflict, as one columnist for *Publishers Weekly* labeled it, no one thought to ask which authors really were likely to be most disadvantaged by the decision of Pantheon’s owners and, indeed, by the overall trend in commercial publishing that it typified.

Those who will lose out won’t be authors of the kind Pantheon cultivated; rather, it is scholars seeking publication of monographs in fields where average sales are low who ultimately will suffer. Authors who in the past have published with houses like Pantheon will continue to have outlets for their work. The academics among them may send their future manuscripts to the university presses whose editors have been wooing them all along; the non-academics will probably turn to the so-called independent publishers (companies, usually small, that are not part of the large media conglomerates), which have been proliferating and thriving in recent years along with independent booksellers.

As Joseph Barbato, an expert on independent publishing, in a letter to the *New York Times* on April 9: “Serious American book publishing is no longer the sole domain of random house and other major trade houses. Last year, Publishers Weekly . . . gave its Carey-Thomas Awards for creative publishing not to multi-million dollar conglomerates, but to

Thunder's Mouth Press, Curbstone Press, Seal Press, and Eridanos Press—small publishers devoted to alternative fiction, Latin American writing, feminist literature, and foreign literary classics.”

For American university presses, “trade” publishing on topics of broad interest is nothing new; the larger presses especially—such as those at Harvard, Princeton, and Yale Universities and the Universities of California and Chicago—for some years have been competing for books that could have appeared equally well under the imprints of Alfred A. Knopf, W. W. Norton, The Free Press, Basic Books, or Pantheon. And since 1980, when the Louisiana State University Press published the financially successful novel *Confederacy of Dunces*, many of the smaller and medium-sized presses have begun publishing fiction. The launching of Tom Clancy's phenomenal career as a novelist by the U.S. Naval Academy's Naval Institute Press is undoubtedly the most extraordinary example of this trend in university press publishing.

What are new, however, are the university presses' growing opportunities to publish the “mid-list book—that is, “serious” non-fiction with projected sales in the range of 2,000 to 10,000 copies. Such opportunities have opened up in the wake of the trouble that publishers like Pantheon have been experiencing as their conglomerate owners have redefined for them what may be considered an acceptable sale. In its annual issue devoted to university presses this year, *Publishers Weekly* quoted E. H. Phillips, executive director of the Association of American University Presses, as identifying “the decline of the serious mid-list book at commercial presses” as one of the reasons for university presses' strong growth in sales in recent years (15.9 per cent in 1988 and 14.6 per cent in 1989).

While they relish the prospect of adding to their lists more books with potential sales in excess of 2,000 copies, university presses also are becoming more wary of continuing to publish, at great expense, scholarly monographs with average sales of only 1,000 copies or less. Kenneth Arnold, director of Rutgers University Press, for example, stated in *Publishers Weekly* last year that “we have almost stopped publishing the short-run monograph. . . . Last year [1988] we did just one. A few years ago they would certainly have made up more than half of our list.”

If other presses follow Rutgers's lead, as some appear to be doing, eventually scholars in fields in which average sales are low—such as music, European history, classics, anthropology, and some area studies (African, Latin American, South Asian)—will have great difficulty finding publishers for their monographs. This difficulty, in turn, will make the process of securing tenure even more arduous for junior faculty members, as long as the requirements for tenure still include publication of one or more books with a reputable scholarly press.

Anticipating this threat, which could make some disciplines “endangered species” in scholarly book publishing, the American Council of Learned Societies joined with the Association of American University Presses a couple of years ago in commissioning a study by Herbert Bailey, former director of Princeton University Press, on “The Rate of Publication of Scholarly Monographs in the Humanities and Social Sciences: 1978-1988.”

This study, released in mid-June, did not reveal—contrary to expectations—any decline in the number of scholarly monographs published even in fields in which sales typically are low. In fact, during the period covered by the study, the total number of monographs published grew by 51 per cent; most presses had expanded their lists of titles intentionally, the report noted, “to become more efficient and deal with financial problems.”

At the same time, the study did document, for one anonymous press considered to be “representative” in this regard, a 33-per-cent reduction in the average number of monographs sold in hardback over a five-year period (from 1,400 to 965). The report attributed this decline to :the increasing specialization of scholarship, reductions in library budgets owing to less government support and tight university finances, the need for libraries to purchase other things (computers), and the resultant higher prices making it difficult for scholars and students to purchase copies, thereby increasing dependence on libraries.”

If there are no certifiably “endangered species” in fields of scholarly book publishing today, the question remains: Will some be threatened with extinction in the coming decade? A quick survey I did recently of the directors (or their top associates) at the 10 largest American university presses supplies a complex picture of editorial strategies and financial planning that rules out an easy answer. But certain basic facts suggest that the threat is real. Together these 10 presses published 75 per cent more titles in 1989 than they did in 1979. Four of these presses expect to have no, or only moderate (less than 5 per cent), growth during the next five years. Only one of the remaining six anticipates growing at a faster rate than it has in the past decade; most of the rest are planning expansion of less than 15 per cent during the next five years.

Those presses expecting to grow will do so principally because they intend to publish new series or to expand into new fields or because they have commitments to distribute books for other institutions (such as museums). Although none of the presses has plans to stop publishing books in specific disciplines in the immediate future, some already have withdrawn from certain fields and others are becoming more cautious about publishing as much as they have in areas where sales are low (such as European history) or where problems abound (such as translations).

Most of the presses do not set strict goals for the number of titles their editors are expected to acquire with expected sales of more than 2,000 copies; nor do most of the presses limit acquisitions of books with expected sales of fewer than 1,000 copies (as two of the largest presses do). But at all of the presses, even those having no formal numerical guidelines, editors are encouraged to look for better-selling titles and discouraged from acquiring too many low-selling monographs.

If most university presses move in the same general direction as these 10 largest presses, a distinct possibility exists that some “species” of scholarly publications may well become “endangered”—if not completely extinct—in the coming decade. For, without plans for future rapid growth, presses will find themselves under increasing pressure to seek financial salvation in books likely to sell well and to cut back on those that will not.

One solution to this problem would be for foundations and universities themselves (including those currently without presses of their own) to subsidize more heavily the publication of scholarly monographs, to sustain scholarship in imperiled disciplines. If that kind of support is not forthcoming, scholars may need to take advantage of “desktop publishing” and other marvels of computer technology to disseminate their work. The network of communication that scholars thus may be forced to create, either on their own or with the help of their professional associations, may eventually displace the traditionally published monograph as the accepted mode of advancing scholarly knowledge. Scholars may have no other choice if they want to pursue careers in academic disciplines in which university presses cease to be active participants.

Thus, the shift at houses like Pantheon away from the medium-selling books toward more popular titles is only the tip of the iceberg; this trend may affect university presses in ways that have profound implications for the nation’s entire system of scholarly communication.